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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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# GUMBOOT CHARLEY ALONG SALT CREEK

by Michael Kocik

"Ste-a-mer's comin'!"

"Ain't been no steamer down that river in a hunnerdyears, at least," came the reply.

"Sure?"

"Yup -- why, ain't been nothin' come down that a-way in more time than grandpa can rem'ber. Got to be at least centoories since any boat's headed down there. Mebbe even ten years."

"Why -- fer sure, Trotty. I know all that, and more. Din't I the one who showed you all about barges and things -- when to lookit, and when? And din't I the one who tookit you 'ploring, when no one else had a mind to?"

The absence of a response turned the tone neatly from reproach to conciliation.

"All I meant were that it curter been a boat, with all that smoke. And it din't look unlike one, too," the first boy added, standing on tiptoe so he could look over the iron spans of the trestle into the muddy water below.

For early June the dragonflies seemed more in abundance than many a blossom wisp. The amber warmth of the morning sun enwrapped the air in a sort of reddish rust, its rays teasing the bridge and creek -- sometimes casting the gray expanses of iron in a pale, theatrical glow; and, othertimes, reluctant to illuminate more than an inch or two of the nearby surface water. The creek itself, though recently swollen and puffed out with rain, retained traces of the early morning's mist. As these strands of fog gently dissipated against the brown earth, they were replaced by the sweet odor of blackberries, melon-green grass, and white water lilies -- all sweating under the constant glare of the summer sun.

The water in the creek, though laden with an orange-brown cloak of mud, moved gradually in an ever southward direction. Occasionally, the sound of a tadpole clearing its throat could be heard, mingled with the explosive titterings of a bullfinch (who was clearly irritated at all the attention the tadpole might be getting). From the north, a single swirling rope of smoke could be made out, suspended in midair like some genie from Aladdin's lamp.

To be sure, from a distance it did not look unlike a steamboat.

In a moment, both boys were off the trestle and scampering down a path overgrown with vines and weeds, winding its way towards the creek. Knee-deep in blackberries and hollow reeds, the two moved along the water's edge -- ducking down, here and there, as if evading some unseen enemy. Heading north in a cautious manner, they more than once halted to examine the water's surface, and the marshy areas surrounding it. While engaged in beating the wiry stalks with their arms, a peevish water rat made the mistake of raising its head where it could be seen.

"See it? There; through there," the smaller of the two yelled, thrashing through the marsh grass after it until the water rat conceded its error, and disappeared into a hole in the soil. Jumping down on all fours, he took a branch of driftwood that was tangled among the debris near shore, and probed the hole until Trotty came over -- dangling a blade of grass from his mouth.

"Get it, Gumboot?"

"Naw -- ran down to its cave," he replied, probing a little longer without success.

"Aw, water rats ain't got no cave, Gumboot."

"Water rat, huh! Why, it was bigger'n that," he replied, in the appropriately scornful tone of someone who knows better.

"Mebbe it was an otter," Trotty mused, chewing the blade of grass in a thoughtful manner.

"Dragon, more likely -- the kind that swoller fire, and spit smoke, and fight knights, and live most forever. Down here," he added, renewing the probe as if the branch were a sword, and the hole a dreaded foe, "is probly a cave, and all."

"What!" Trotty exclaimed, his eyes opening wide with astonishment as the blade of grass fell from his mouth. "With trezure, and dismals in distress? No!"

"Sure. Why, I reckon there must be more'n a thousand dolluhs a-hidden there, if he's any respect'le kind of dragon. Blame it, but this branch ain't long enough to reach no dragon," Gumboot said in disgust, throwing it to the ground with proper disdain. "Why, what I wudden give for a proper sword, right now, Trotty. Ain't no respect'le knight as be without one, at a time like this."

"Trezure! But, Gumboot -- real dolluhs?" Trotty asked, unable to overcome his amazement.

"Why, sure. Stands to figger there might even be gold, or jewels," he added solemnly, and with all the dramatic effect of delayed emphasis. "But it ain't goin' a-do us no good without a sword. Blame!"

While Trotty was still mulling over the possibilities of imminent wealth, Gumboot sprang up to examine the shoreline. It was not yet ten, but the heat was beginning to take its toll on the residents of the creek: the bullfinch had ceased its earlier protestations, and was reposing peaceably on a bit of driftwood, where it could reign majestically over the rest of the area; the tadpole, after swimming furiously throughout the muddy water, had retired to a lily petal, where it was content to sun itself, and leave weightier matters to the bullfinch; and the water rat, when no one was looking, had taken to poking its head out of its hole in a quizzical expression at both, as if trying to decide whether they were friends, or part of some conspiracy against it. By and large, the heat sapped the energy of the inhabitants much as it had scattered the morning mist, leaving a pronounced languor about the region.

Adapting to this change in mood, Gumboot and Trotty discarded their cotton shirts and plunged into the listless water of the creek -- splashing about like two John the Baptists, in their eagerness to convert the other to complete wetness. While swimming, each took turns at being pirates until both suffered mortal wounds, and crept off to die alone, among the reeds on the shore, as duty obliged them to do.

As the sun burned brightly, each boy was lost in solemn contemplation -- assured that their valiant struggle for some higher cause was not in vain. Then, just as quickly, the summer stillness was shattered by a massive shout of "Whew!", as an outstretched arm pointed to something further up the creek.

"Trotty! Looky there -- up a hunnerd yards: a sword!"

Looking upwards, as commanded, Trotty caught sight of a large, gnarled branch -- tumbled among some other driftwood stuck in the watery mud, and sticking out above the creek's

indifferent flow. Before he could utter a word of protest as to what he saw, Gumboot was already in the water -- alternately running and swimming, as the depths demanded, until he had reached the wreckage and released the branch in question. In another moment he was back at Trotty's side, brandishing the mock sword over his head with all due exhilaration.

"Blame, but if this ain't a proper sword," he yelled, flailing it madly about him -- thrusting and parrying it at some unseen enemy, while Trotty did his best to stay out of the way.

"What luck, Gumboot," Trotty said, as he dodged another jab of the branch. "Now we can get that trezure."

"And luck!" Gumboot cried scornfully. "Why, luck had nary a thing to do with it, Trotty -- it's fate, pure and simple. The Lady of the Lake gave it up, just like she did with Arthur."

"Mebbe so. But how'n you figger she's here, instead of some for'n lake?"

At this, Gumboot scratched his head with the branch, as if sorely perplexed. Then, latching on to an idea, he made a slashing movement with his sword.

"Why, consider. Ain't no knights over there, any more, and none as likely to be -- they've plumb forgot how. Now, a body can't hardly 'spect a power like hers to be wasted, a-waitin' for someone who ain't likely to show. So, it stands to reason she got fed up with sittin', and settled for greener pastoors -- which is why she come here, where people know how to be knights without bein' too 'barrassed."

"I reckon that's so, Gumboot."

"Blame if it ain't," he replied, swinging the branch in a death lunge, just for emphasis. "Now, no dragon as stands a chance 'gainst a magic sword, Trotty -- no way."

"What should we do, then, Gumboot -- attack it right out?"

"Naw. Best way is to be nice and circumspect."

"Why, what fer? Knights ain't 'sposed to hide like they was afeard, Gumboot."

"Afeard! Who's afeard?" he demanded, pointing the branch at Trotty's bare chest. "Look. Knights had to plan things, or they udden have stood a chance 'gainst ogres, or evil wizards, who were always lyin' in wait for them. 'Sides, it's cleaner; dismals in distress secretly hate all that blood, though they know they have to look all bright and happy about it, to keep up 'pearances. Frightens 'em to death -- or so's I hear tell."

"Mebbe you're right. What do you think we should do, then -- circumspectly, that is?"

"Lemme think," he replied, sitting down on the bank and scratching his ankle abstractedly with the branch. After a few moments of expressionless thought, his face brightened again. "Right. I figger that if he's any respect'le dragon, his cave ought to have plenty of passageways and secret tunnels. If we can find the main outlet, up northers, I 'spect we can sneak in there, and catch him by s'prise."

"How'n we to do that, Gumboot? There must be a hunnerd holes all along the river, any of which could be his."

"Why, why, why -- why, sure. Smoke -- smoke has to come out, somewheres. Up ahead, what we saw afore -- that was the outlet for his smoke, or else he'd explode all innards. All we got to do is foller that, and we've found the hole."

Triumphant, both boys yelled their excitement aloud, and hurried off north to where the wisp of smoke was still gently curling upwards in the breeze. As their bare feet

navigated the shoreline -- cautiously treading past tangled vines, over piles of rotting branches, and around massive logs blanketed with moss -- the sun reached its highest arc in the midday sky. Corresponding to this momentous occasion, the two of them entered a dense woodland region crumbling in shadow.

The thicket of trees on either side was overgrown, and cringing on the edges of the creek in an uncomfortable, crowding fashion. At the narrowest portion of the creek, in a place known as Potter's Landing, the branches on the left bank touched those overhanging on the right, and became intertwined. What light there was descended through the treetops in a diffuse manner, casting the entire area in a vague, never-never land of gray hues. Beyond the landing, the creek became unceremoniously diverted over the top of a weedy knoll, where it disappeared from sight among a catalogue of black stones and chipped granite.

Arriving at this hollow in a fever of anticipation, each boy's spirits was dampened by the persistent gloom hovering over the place, but reluctant to admit that uneasiness to the other. Giving his sword a few restless thwacks at the side of a tree, Gumboot nervously let loose with a low whistle.

"What'd you go and do that, fer?" Trotty gasped, thunderstruck at Gumboot's audacity.

"Dunno. Place's spooky, that's all. Ain't no harm in whistlin', is there?" he asked uneasily.

"Nothin' wrong! Why, everyone knows the place is ha'nted by old Potter," Trotty whispered sharply, looking carefully all around him.

"Huh -- old wives' tales, no less. You ain't afeard now, are you?" Gumboot asked somewhat derisively, practicing a few more thrusts with the branch.

"O' course I'm afeard. Anyone with any sense would worrit at bein' all alone here. Why, Potter was hung on that very tree," Trotty said, pointing a trembling arm to a barren beech on the left bank.

Swallowing quickly, Gumboot tried to shrug the warning off.

"Ain't nothin' to it, Trotty -- and, even if there was, what of it? There's plenty of places where people got themselves hung, and not a dad-blamed one o' them had itself ha'nted."

"Oh please, Gumboot," Trotty pleaded anxiously. "Don't ever be so scornful, 'cuz ghosts can sense it right off when a body's got no respect. Sure, it ain't no use denyin' that there's other spots -- but not a one, I reckon, has a curse on it."

"Curse? Go on."

"No, no -- it's true, Gumboot. Afore he died, Potter turned to old man Turner, all wild, and damned his soul outright. Said that not a one of that mob would live another year, and that the creek would a-never run clear again -- and that's a fact, Gumboot: old man Turner died straight off, and the rest all follered in a year -- and this creek's never been clear since."

"Aw, go on, now. The creek's got mud in it, that's all."

"No, Gumboot -- soil 'round here's all black, but the water's reddish-brown. It's his blood that's stained it," Trotty exclaimed, raising his voice for emphasis.

"Why --

"His blood, Gumboot. And once a year, same time, you can see his ghost a-hangin' on that same tree. Grandpa says that those who see it never live more'n a year, 'cuz o' the curse."

"Why, blame it, Trotty," Gumboot said angrily, "nobody's seen Potter's ghost -- here,





or elsewheres. Never."

"And that's 'cuz no one wants to, if he can help it."

"Well, if I happen to see that ghost, I'll whack him to bits," he said unconvincingly, while thumping his shin with the branch.

"Hush! You want his ghost to hear you? Sword or not, there ain't nothin' to help you 'gainst a spell -- unless it's another, just as powerful," Trotty whispered, continuing to glance warily about him.

"And what would that be?" Gumboot asked, beginning to feel a little frightened.

"Whenever you enter a bewitched place, you can't have anythin' on you but garlic and salt. You tie both in a tiny sack, afore you go in, then you face south, turn around quickly three times, and tossit the bag over your left shoulder. The salt drags the ghost to the ground, and the garlic keeps it a-there until after you've gone. Oh, I forgot the most important thing: afore you tossit the bag, you got to say twice:

'Salt, salt, dead cat's stare  
Garlic foller and keep it there.'

When that's a-done, ain't nothin' can harm you as long as you don't look back, and keep a-headin' to where you're goin'. If you stop once, the spell's broken, and the ghost can work his will. That's why you got to foller things in the right order."

"What -- what about in broad daylight; can they harm you then?"

Trotty scratched his head a good while before answering.

"Don't see how, Gumboot. Ghosts get used to doin' things reg'lar, I s'pose, so they're only up and about at night. Still, Grandpa says they can bewitch trav'lers -- make 'em lose their way until night, and then they're done fer."

"Let's a-goin', then. Even knights didn't have to take chances, if they could help it. Now, where's that smoke -- to the left?"

"No, it's off to the right, I think -- oh, let's see, now. Oh, Gumboot -- what if we's bewitched? I ain't got no garlic, or nothin',

on me!" Trotty squealed, turning pale at the thought.

"No, no," Gumboot said, looking carefully in both directions: "it's off to the left, by the summit wherethe creek bends."

So saying, the two boys headed slowly up the twisting path, tearing their pants on the brambles as they did so. After a determined ascent, they cleared the top, and glanced about them for a trace of the smoke.

"There it is!" Gumboot cried excitedly, pointing to a spot about five hundred yards distant. "But blame if it don't seem as far away as afore we started."

As they gazed on in silent appreciation, they saw that the wisp of smoke was losing its intensity in the dying light, and starting to fade into a strand no wider than a hair. Quickly brushing themselves off, the two of them ran furiously through the undergrowth in the direction of the smoke. The odor of blackberries and muddy water played about their nostrils as they followed the meanderings of the creek out of the thickets, and into a grassy clearing. Dodging the lairs of moles and water rats that broke across their path, even as they ran, they soon discovered the origin of the smoke: a campfire, made of brush and driftwood dragged from the creek, and then deposited carelessly in an area cleared for the purpose.

And there -- clinging to the fringes -- they saw what remained of a stack of books, all charred beyond identification: a blackened cover, a bit of scorched paper, and a pile of gray ash.

"Gumboot -- "

"Hush now," Gumboot said, as he tried to pick up the book with the blackened cover, only to have it crumble into dust in his hands. "Almost over."

As the fire began to smolder, the two boys crouched motionlessly around the stone rim, and watched the stray cinders dissolve the remaining pages of yellow manuscript. Then, while the last few sheets scattered into ash, two new wisps of smoke floated up from the rim, joined the central column, and evaporated into the June night -- leaving the sun to set upon an empty clearing.